

HALF-HOUR CLASSICS

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*Sonnets from the Portuguese*

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THOMAS Y. CROWELL COMPANY









Marie Ann Wells

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# SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE

*The cut on the title-page represents the clasped hands of  
Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.  
Sculptured from life by Harriet Hosmer.*

# SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY  
CHARLOTTE PORTER AND  
HELEN A. CLARKE



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## INTRODUCTION

REALITY never before flung itself at once so throbbingly and so exaltingly into any love lyrics as in the "Sonnets." Read all there are in English verse before 1846, and then turn to these by this modern Catarina to her Camoëns, and the alivest of them seem to be artistically contrived reflections of a waned emotional moment. Hers are nobler than the noblest, and yet unflawed by any sense of a creative past tense.

Like a single artless outpour the song rises, yet it has a traceable framework of design; and the "Letters of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning" verify the fact of a foundation for every one of them upon successive actualities in the lovers' relations.

Love and poetic genius together have reconstituted this Realism into an undying Word.

The opening and the closing sonnets are separable from the rest so far as may be. The preluding strain sounds out the main theme, and the dedicatory conclusion places the completed scroll between the lover's hands. The culminating moments are marked in Sonnets v. and x., xvi., xxii., and xxvii., and in xliii. Each triumphs upon a height climbed toward step by step, past the lesser heights of



preceding ranges of changing feeling. Through all is movement, growth in riper love.

With the dramatic force of a scene that is the key to all that follows,—especially so in the contrast drawn between belief in Death and the faith in Life which Love calls for,—the action, as it were, of the love-story is unveiled in the first sonnet. It consists in the electrifying apparition of Love in a withdrawn life, so electrifying that its recognition, because of its thrilling import, is sceptically greeted. The mighty images of the goddess-forms of the processional past years, and of a “mystic shape” of supreme mastery in the future, fill the stage with omen or else with promise.

Obstacles, only obstacles in love’s path, the following three sonnets sing; misapprehension of God’s purpose in life for her; disaccord between her stunted possibilities in life, and therefore in art, and those of her lover. Then her adverse view of the fate separating them is delicately interwound in the next three sonnets with more responsive chords of feeling.

The danger of her “Yes” breaks out in Sonnet v. Its stately metaphor of Electra and her sepulchral urn is splendidly handled to imply the slow solemn glow of hope which the chain of Sonnets viii.-xii. ring the changes of debate upon, through the successive links of what she can give in return; if she ought in generousness to give it; if love can

so exalt the unfit; till, in Sonnet x., her own answering love asserts itself and rises, love-transfigured, to a corresponding height.

The dependence of her love upon his initiation carries the thought on somewhat hesitatingly through moods that falter and shrink from adequate answer in xi.-xiii.; that ask and yield a purely spiritual devotion in xiv. and xv., until the goal of a whole-hearted consent is reached in xvi.

Too passive a goal is this for the fervor of her awakening devotion. It climbs upward in xvii.; past the pair of sonnets that celebrate the exchange of the locks of hair; past recapitulating memories of his advent and his declaration, and attains the glory of the love that sings a kindred soul out to his face in the supreme Sonnet xxii. So essentially equal and active a love between woman and man was probably never before recorded in a lyric.

In the strength of that climax comes thence the recoil full circle against the original faint-heartedness of the opening sonnets, Sonnet xxvii. declaring in perfect opposition to their doubt of love and life the equal strength of Love with Death. Death is abjured, postponed, defied as no conqueror now, if it does come, the past is belittled and the future confidently rested upon in the preceding sonnets leading up to this; after which,—with hopeful face set forward, away from what life was before they met,—moment

after moment of exultation follows, in alternating wave-like expressions of incidents in their acknowledged love, his letters, her thoughts of him, her mental image of him in his absence, the better reality of his return, the memory of her conquered fears, the sound of her pet name in his voice, and with that sound all that the fusing of her past in this present means; and so on till the crown is set on all with the declaration unfurled with unreserved frankness in Sonnet xliii. The dedication of the series to him follows and consummates the whole.

The bare turnings of the construction-walls of the "Sonnets" may be threaded thus; but the golden intimacy of companionship within the house, the flowers and fragrance, the pictures and imagery flexible to every throbbing of living personal impulse,—this is not meant to be dissevered from the impression given.

It is an artistic miracle, fusing within the mind of the reader the spontaneousness of warm-blooded life with the polished fixity of highly conscious poetry.



# SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE

I would fain a lock of hair away  
to a man, dashed, except this to thee,  
Which rest upon my fingers thoughtfully  
I ring out to the full brown length and say  
'Take it'. My day of grief went yesterday -  
My hair no longer bound to my foot's sole,  
For pliant I it from rose on my little knee  
As girls do, any more. It only may  
Have shade on two pale cheeks, the mark of tears  
I caught dropping from the head that hangs aside  
Through sorrow's thick I thought the funeral hears  
Would take this part; - but thou art justified  
Take it, then, - finding peace from all those years  
We kept my mother left here when she died

FACSIMILE OF SONNET XVIII,  
FROM MRS. BROWNING'S MANUSCRIPT

# I

I THOUGHT once how Theocritus had sung  
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,  
Who each one in a gracious hand appears  
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:  
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,  
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,  
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,  
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung  
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,  
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move  
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;  
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,—  
“Guess now who holds thee?”—“Death,” I said. But, there,  
The silver answer rang,—“Not Death, but Love.”



## II

BUT only three in all God's universe  
Have heard this word thou hast said,—Himself, beside  
Thee speaking, and me listening! and replied  
One of us . . . *that* was God, . . . and laid the curse  
So darkly on my eyelids, as to amerce  
My sight from seeing thee,—that if I had died,  
The deathweights, placed there, would have signified  
Less absolute exclusion. “Nay” is worse  
From God than from all others, O my friend!  
Men could not part us with their worldly jars,  
Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend;  
Our hands would touch for all the mountain bars:  
And, heaven being rolled between us at the end,  
We should but vow the faster for the stars.

### III

UNLIKE are we, unlike, O princely Heart!  
Unlike our uses and our destinies.  
Our ministering two angels look surprise  
On one another, as they strike athwart  
Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art  
A quest for queens to social pageantries,  
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes  
Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part  
Of chief musician. What hast *thou* to do  
With looking from the lattice-lights at me,  
A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through  
The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?  
The chrism is on thine head,—on mine, the dew,—  
And Death must dig the level where these agree.

#### IV

THOU hast thy calling to some palace-floor,  
Most gracious singer of high poems! where  
The dancers will break footing, from the care  
Of watching up thy pregnant lips for more.  
And dost thou lift this house's latch too poor  
For hand of thine? and canst thou think and bear  
To let thy music drop here unaware  
In folds of golden fulness at my door?  
Look up and see the casement broken in,  
The bats and owlets builders in the roof!  
My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.  
Hush, call no echo up in further proof  
Of desolation! there's a voice within  
That weeps . . . as thou must sing . . . alone, aloof.



## V

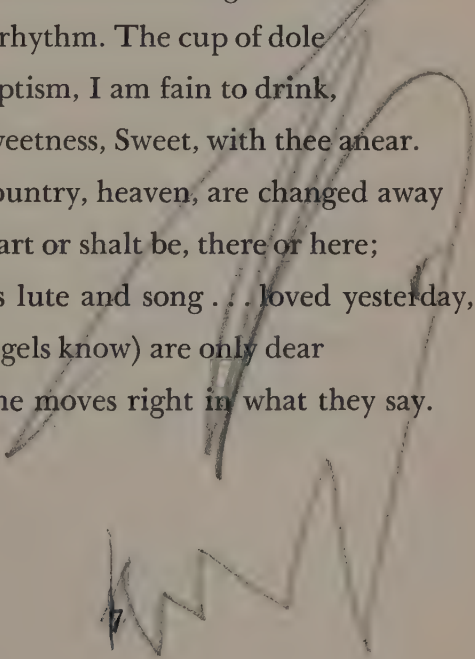
I LIFT my heavy heart up solemnly,  
As once Electra her sepulchral urn,  
And, looking in thine eyes, I overturn  
The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see  
What a great heap of grief lay hid in me,  
And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn  
Through the ashen greyness. If thy foot in scorn  
Could tread them out to darkness utterly,  
It might be well perhaps. But if instead  
Thou wait beside me for the wind to blow  
The grey dust up, . . . those laurels on thine head  
O my Belovèd, will not shield thee so,  
That none of all the fires shall scorch and shred  
The hair beneath. Stand farther off then! go.

## VI

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand  
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore  
Alone upon the threshold of my door  
Of individual life, I shall command  
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand  
Serenely in the sunshine as before,  
Without the sense of that which I forbore—  
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land  
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine  
With pulses that beat double. What I do  
And what I dream include thee, as the wine  
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue  
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,  
And sees within my eyes the tears of two.

## VII

THE face of all the world is changed, I think,  
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul  
Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole  
Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink  
Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink,  
Was caught up into love, and taught the whole  
Of life in a new rhythm. The cup of dole  
God gave for baptism, I am fain to drink,  
And praise its sweetness, Sweet, with thee anear.  
The names of country, heaven, are changed away  
For where thou art or shalt be, there or here;  
And this . . . this lute and song . . . loved yesterday,  
(The singing angels know) are only dear  
Because thy name moves right in what they say.



## VIII

WHAT can I give thee back, O liberal  
And princely giver, who hast brought the gold  
And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold,  
And laid them on the outside of the wall  
For such as I to take or leave withal,  
In unexpected largesse? am I cold,  
Ungrateful, that for these most manifold  
High gifts, I render nothing back at all?  
Not so; not cold,—but very poor instead.  
Ask God who knows. For frequent tears have run  
The colours from my life, and left so dead  
And pale a stuff, it were not fitly done  
To give the same as pillow to thy head.  
Go farther! let it serve to trample on.

## IX

CAN it be right to give what I can give  
To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears  
As salt as mine, and hear the sighing years  
Re-sighing on my lips renunciative  
Through those infrequent smiles which fail to live  
For all thy adjurations? O my fears,  
That this can scarce be right! We are not peers,  
So to be lovers; and I own, and grieve,  
That givers of such gifts as mine are, must  
Be counted with the ungenerous. Out, alas!  
I will not soil thy purple with my dust,  
Nor breathe my poison on thy Venice-glass,  
Nor give thee any love—which were unjust.  
Beloved, I only love thee! let it pass.



## X

YET, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed  
And worthy of acceptation. Fire is bright,  
Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light  
Leaps in the flame from cedar-plank or weed:  
And love is fire. And when I say at need  
*I love thee . . . mark! . . . I love thee*—in thy sight  
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,  
With conscience of the new rays that proceed  
Out of my face toward thine. There's nothing low  
In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures  
Who love God, God accepts while loving so.  
And what I *feel*, across the inferior features  
Of what I *am*, doth flash itself, and show  
How that great work of Love enhances Nature's.

## XI

AND therefore if to love can be desert,  
I am not all unworthy. Cheeks as pale  
As these you see, and trembling knees that fail  
To bear the burden of a heavy heart,—  
This weary minstrel-life that once was girt  
To climb Aornus, and can scarce avail  
To pipe now 'gainst the valley nightingale  
A melancholy music,—why advert  
To these things? O Belovèd, it is plain  
I am not of thy worth nor for thy place!  
And yet, because I love thee, I obtain  
From that same love this vindicating grace,  
To live on still in love, and yet in vain,—  
To bless thee, yet renounce thee to thy face.

## XII

INDEED this very love which is my boast,  
And which, when rising up from breast to brow,  
Doth crown me with a ruby large enow  
To draw men's eyes and prove the inner cost,—  
This love even, all my worth, to the uttermost,  
I should not love withal, unless that thou  
Hadst set me an example, shown me how,  
When first thine earnest eyes with mine were crossed,  
And love called love. And thus, I cannot speak  
Of love even, as a good thing of my own:  
Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and weak,  
And placed it by thee on a golden throne,—  
And that I love (O soul, we must be meek!)  
Is by thee only, whom I love alone.

### XIII

AND wilt thou have me fashion into speech  
The love I bear thee, finding words enough,  
And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,  
Between our faces, to cast light on each?—  
I drop it at thy feet. I cannot teach  
My hand to hold my spirit so far off  
From myself—me—that I should bring thee proof  
In words, of love hid in me out of reach.  
Nay, let the silence of my womanhood  
Commend my woman-love to thy belief,—  
Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,  
And rend the garment of my life, in brief,  
By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,  
Lest one touch of this heart convey its grief.

## XIV

If thou must love me, let it be for nought  
Except for love's sake only. Do not say  
"I love her for her smile—her look—her way  
Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought  
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought  
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—  
For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may  
Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,  
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for  
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—  
A creature might forget to weep, who bore  
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!  
But love me for love's sake, that evermore  
Thou mayst love on, through love's eternity.

## XV

ACCUSE me not, beseech thee, that I wear  
Too calm and sad a face in front of thine;  
For we two look two ways, and cannot shine  
With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.  
On me thou lookest with no doubting care,  
As on a bee shut in a crystalline;  
Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine,  
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air  
Were most impossible failure, if I strove  
To fail so. But I look on thee—on thee—  
Beholding, besides love, the end of love,  
Hearing oblivion beyond memory;  
As one who sits and gazes from above,  
Over the rivers to the bitter sea.



## XVI

AND yet, because thou overcomest so,  
Because thou art more noble and like a king,  
Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling  
Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow  
Too close against thine heart henceforth to know  
How it shook when alone. Why, conquering  
May prove as lordly and complete a thing  
In lifting upward, as in crushing low!  
And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword  
To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,  
Even so, Belovèd, I at last record,  
Here ends my strife. If *thou* invite me forth,  
I rise above abasement at the word.  
Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth.

## XVII

My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes  
God set between His After and Before,  
And strike up and strike off the general roar  
Of the rushing worlds a melody that floats  
In a serene air purely. Antidotes  
Of medicated music, answering for  
Mankind's forlornest uses, thou canst pour  
From thence into their ears. God's will devotes  
Thine to such ends, and mine to wait on thine.  
How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?  
A hope, to sing by gladly? of a fine  
Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse?  
A shade, in which to sing—of palm or pine?  
A grave, on which to rest from singing? Choose.

## XVIII

I NEVER gave a lock of hair away  
To a man, Dearest, except this to thee,  
Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully,  
I ring out to the full brown length and say  
“Take it.” My day of youth went yesterday;  
My hair no longer bounds to my foot’s glee,  
Nor plant I it from rose or myrtle-tree,  
As girls do, any more: it only may  
Now shade on two pale cheeks the mark of tears,  
Taught drooping from the head that hangs aside  
Through sorrow’s trick. I thought the funeral-shears  
Would take this first, but Love is justified,—  
Take it thou,—finding pure, from all those years,  
The kiss my mother left here when she died.

## XIX

THE soul's Rialto hath its merchandise;  
I barter curl for curl upon that mart,  
And from my poet's forehead to my heart  
Receive this lock which outweighs argosies,  
As purply black, as erst to Pindar's eyes  
The dim purpureal tresses gloomed athwart  
The nine white Muse-brows. For this counterpart,  
The bay-crown's shade, Belovèd, I surmise,  
Still lingers on thy curl, it is so black!  
Thus, with a fillet of smooth-kissing breath,  
I tie the shadows safe from gliding back,  
And lay the gift where nothing hindereth;  
Here on my heart, as on thy brow, to lack  
No natural heat till mine grows cold in death.

## XX

BELOVÈD, my Belovèd, when I think  
That thou wast in the world a year ago,  
What time I sat alone here in the snow  
And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink  
No moment at thy voice, but, link by link,  
Went counting all my chains as if that so  
They never could fall off at any blow  
Struck by thy possible hand,—why, thus I drink  
Of life's great cup of wonder! Wonderful,  
Never to feel thee thrill the day or night  
With personal act or speech,—nor ever cull  
Some prescience of thee with the blossoms white  
Thou sawest growing! Atheists are as dull,  
Who cannot guess God's presence out of sight.

## XXI

SAY over again, and yet once over again,  
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated  
Should seem "a cuckoo-song," as thou dost treat it,  
Remember, never to the hill or plain,  
Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain  
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.  
Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted  
By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt's pain  
Cry, "Speak once more—thou lovest!" Who can fear  
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,  
Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?  
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—toll  
The silver iterance!—only minding, Dear,  
To love me also in silence with thy soul.



## XXII

WHEN our two souls stand up erect and strong,  
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,  
Until the lengthening wings break into fire  
At either curvèd point,—what bitter wrong  
Can the earth do to us, that we should not long  
Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,  
The angels would press on us and aspire  
To drop some golden orb of perfect song  
Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay  
Rather on earth, Belovèd,—where the unfit  
Contrarious moods of men recoil away  
And isolate pure spirits, and permit  
A place to stand and love in for a day,  
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

### XXIII

Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead,  
Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine?  
And would the sun for thee more coldly shine  
Because of grave-damps falling round my head?  
I marvelled, my Belovèd, when I read  
Thy thought so in the letter. I am thine—  
But . . . so much to thee? Can I pour thy wine  
While my hands tremble? Then my soul, instead  
Of dreams of death, resumes life's lower range.  
Then, love me, Love! look on me—breathe on me!  
As brighter ladies do not count it strange,  
For love, to give up acres and degree,  
I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange  
My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!

## XXIV

LET the world's sharpness, like a clasp knife,  
Shut in upon itself and do no harm  
In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,  
And let us hear no sound of human strife  
After the click of the shutting. Life to life—  
I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm,  
And feel as safe as guarded by a charm  
Against the stab of worldlings, who if rife  
Are weak to injure. Very whitely still  
The lilies of our lives may reassure  
Their blossoms from their roots, accessible  
Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer,  
Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill.  
God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

## XXV

A HEAVY heart, Belovèd, have I borne  
From year to year until I saw thy face,  
And sorrow after sorrow took the place  
Of all those natural joys as lightly worn  
As the stringed pearls, each lifted in its turn  
By a beating heart at dance-time. Hopes apace  
Were changed to long despairs, till God's own grace  
Could scarcely lift above the world forlorn  
My heavy heart. Then *thou* didst bid me bring  
And let it drop adown thy calmly great  
Deep being! Fast it sinketh, as a thing  
Which its own nature doth precipitate,  
While thine doth close above it, mediating  
Betwixt the stars and the unaccomplished fate.

## XXVI

I LIVED with visions for my company  
Instead of men and women, years ago,  
And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know  
A sweeter music than they played to me.  
But soon their trailing purple was not free  
Of this world's dust, their lutes did silent grow,  
And I myself grew faint and blind below  
Their vanishing eyes. Then THOU didst come—to be,  
Belovèd, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,  
Their songs, their splendours (better, yet the same,  
As river-water hallowed into fonts),  
Met in thee, and from out thee overcame  
My soul with satisfaction of all wants:  
Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

## XXVII

MY own Belovèd, who hast lifted me  
From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,  
And, in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown  
A life-breath, till the forehead hopefully  
Shines out again, as all the angels see,  
Before thy saving kiss! My own, my own,  
Who camest to me when the world was gone,  
And I who looked for only God, found *thee*!  
I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad.  
As one who stands in dewless asphodel  
Looks backward on the tedious time he had  
In the upper life,—so I, with bosom-swell,  
Make witness, here, between the good and bad,  
That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.



## XXVIII

My letters! all dead paper, mute and white!  
And yet they seem alive and quivering  
Against my tremulous hands which loose the string  
And let them drop down on my knee to-night.  
This said,—he wished to have me in his sight  
Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring  
To come and touch my hand . . . a simple thing,  
Yet I wept for it!—this, . . . the paper's light . . .  
Said, *Dear, I love thee*; and I sank and quailed  
As if God's future thundered on my past.  
This said, *I am thine*—and so its ink has paled  
With lying at my heart that beat too fast.  
And this . . . O Love, thy words have ill availed  
If, what this said, I dared repeat at last!

## XXIX

I THINK of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud  
About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,  
Put out broad leaves, and soon there's nought to see  
Except the straggling green which hides the wood.  
Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood  
I will not have my thoughts instead of thee  
Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly  
Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,  
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,  
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee  
Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!  
Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee  
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,  
I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.

### XXX

I SEE thine image through my tears to-night,  
And yet to-day I saw thee smiling. How  
Refer the cause?—Belovèd, is it thou  
Or I, who makes me sad? The acolyte  
Amid the chanted joy and thankful rite  
May so fall flat, with pale insensate brow,  
On the altar-stair. I hear thy voice and vow,  
Perplexed, uncertain, since thou art out of sight,  
As he, in his swooning ears, the choir's Amen.  
Belovèd, dost thou love? or did I see all  
The glory as I dreamed, and fainted when  
Too vehement light dilated my ideal,  
For my soul's eyes? Will that light come again,  
As now these tears come—falling hot and real?

## XXXI

THOU comest! all is said without a word.  
I sit beneath thy looks, as children do  
In the noon-sun, with souls that tremble through  
Their happy eyelids from an unaverred  
Yet prodigal inward joy. Behold, I erred  
In that last doubt! and yet I cannot rue  
The sin most, but the occasion—that we two  
Should for a moment stand unministered  
By a mutual presence. Ah, keep near and close,  
Thou dovelike help! and, when my fears would rise,  
With thy broad heart serenely interpose:  
Brood down with thy divine sufficiencies  
These thoughts which tremble when bereft of those,  
Like callow birds left desert to the skies.

## XXXII

THE first time that the sun rose on thine oath  
To love me, I looked forward to the moon  
To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon  
And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.  
Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe;  
And, looking on myself, I seemed not one  
For such man's love!—more like an out-of-tune  
Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth  
To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in haste,  
Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.  
I did not wrong myself so, but I placed  
A wrong on *thee*. For perfect strains may float  
'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced,—  
And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.

### XXXIII

Yes, call me by my pet-name! let me hear  
The name I used to run at, when a child,  
From innocent play, and leave the cowslips piled,  
To glance up in some face that proved me dear  
With the look of its eyes. I miss the clear  
Fond voices which, being drawn and reconciled  
Into the music of Heaven's undefiled,  
Call me no longer. Silence on the bier,  
While I call God—call God!—So let thy mouth  
Be heir to those who are now exanimate.  
Gather the north flowers to complete the south,  
And catch the early love up in the late.  
Yes, call me by that name,—and I, in truth,  
With the same heart, will answer and not wait.



## XXXIV

WITH the same heart, I said, I'll answer thee  
As those, when thou shalt call me by my name—  
Lo, the vain promise! is the same, the same,  
Perplexed and ruffled by life's strategy?  
When called before, I told how hastily  
I dropped my flowers or brake off from a game,  
To run and answer with the smile that came  
At play last moment, and went on with me  
Through my obedience. When I answer now,  
I drop a grave thought, break from solitude;  
Yet still my heart goes to thee—ponder how—  
Not as to a single good, but all my good!  
Lay thy hand on it, best one, and allow  
That no child's foot could run fast as this blood.

## XXXV

IF I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange  
And be all to me? Shall I never miss  
Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss  
That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,  
When I look up, to drop on a new range  
Of walls and floors, another home than this?  
Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is  
Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change?  
That's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,  
To conquer grief, tries more, as all things prove;  
For grief indeed is love and grief beside.  
Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.  
Yet love me—wilt thou? Open thine heart wide,  
And fold within the wet wings of thy dove.

## XXXVI

WHEN we met first and loved, I did not build  
Upon the event with marble. Could it mean  
To last, a love set pendulous between  
Sorrow and sorrow? Nay, I rather thrilled,  
Distrusting every light that seemed to gild  
The onward path, and feared to overlean  
A finger even. And, though I have grown serene  
And strong since then, I think that God has willed  
A still renewable fear . . . O love, O troth . . .  
Lest these enclaspèd hands should never hold,  
This mutual kiss drop down between us both  
As an unowned thing, once the lips being cold.  
And Love, be false! if *he*, to keep one oath,  
Must lose one joy, by his life's star foretold.

## XXXVII

PARDON, oh, pardon, that my soul should make,  
Of all that strong divineness which I know  
For thine and thee, an image only so  
Formed of the sand, and fit to shift and break.  
It is that distant years which did not take  
Thy sovrantry, recoiling with a blow,  
Have forced my swimming brain to undergo  
Their doubt and dread, and blindly to forsake  
Thy purity of likeness and distort  
Thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit:  
As if a shipwrecked Pagan, safe in port,  
His guardian sea-god to commemorate,  
Should set a sculptured porpoise, gills a-snort  
And vibrant tail, within the temple-gate.

## XXXVIII

FIRST time he kissed me, he but only kissed  
The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;  
And ever since, it grew more clean and white,  
Slow to world-greetings, quick with its "Oh, list,"  
When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst  
I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,  
Than that first kiss. The second passed in height  
The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,  
Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!  
That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown,  
With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.  
The third upon my lips was folded down  
In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed,  
I have been proud and said, "My love, my own."

### XXXIX

BECAUSE thou hast the power and own'st the grace  
To look through and behind this mask of me  
(Against which years have beat thus blanchingly  
With their rains), and behold my soul's true face,  
The dim and weary witness of life's race,—  
Because thou hast the faith and love to see,  
Through that same soul's distracting lethargy,  
The patient angel waiting for a place  
In the new Heavens,—because nor sin nor woe,  
Nor God's infliction, nor death's neighbourhood,  
Nor all which others viewing, turn to go,  
Nor all which makes me tired of all, self-viewed,—  
Nothing repels thee, . . . Dearest, teach me so  
To pour out gratitude, as thou dost, good!

## XL

OH, yes! they love through all this world of ours!  
I will not gainsay love, called love forsooth.  
I have heard love talked in my early youth,  
And since, not so long back but that the flowers  
Then gathered, smell still. Mussulmans and Giaours  
Throw kerchiefs at a smile, and have no ruth  
For any weeping. Polypheme's white tooth  
Slips on the nut if, after frequent showers,  
The shell is over-smooth,—and not so much  
Will turn the thing called love, aside to hate  
Or else to oblivion. But thou art not such  
A lover, my Belovèd! thou canst wait  
Through sorrow and sickness, to bring souls to touch,  
And think it soon when others cry "Too late."

## XLI

I THANK all who have loved me in their hearts,  
With thanks and love from mine. Deep thanks to all  
Who paused a little near the prison-wall  
To hear my music in its louder parts  
Ere they went onward, each one to the mart's  
Or temple's occupation, beyond call.  
But thou, who, in my voice's sink and fall  
When the sob took it, thy divinest Art's  
Own instrument didst drop down at thy foot  
To hearken what I said between my tears, . . .  
Instruct me how to thank thee! Oh, to shoot  
My soul's full meaning into future years,  
That *they* should lend it utterance, and salute  
Love that endures, from Life that disappears!



## XLII

*"My future will not copy fair my past"—*

I wrote that once; and thinking at my side

My ministering life-angel justified

The word by his appealing look upcast

To the white throne of God, I turned at last,

And there, instead, saw thee, not unallied

To angels in thy soul! Then I, long tried

By natural ills, received the comfort fast,

While budding, at thy sight, my pilgrim's staff

Gave out green leaves with morning dew's impearled.

I seek no copy now of life's first half:

Leave here the pages with long musing curled,

And write me new my future's epigraph,

New angel mine, unhop'd for in the world!

## NOTES



## NOTES

AFTER Elizabeth Barrett Barrett's marriage to Robert Browning, and when they were fully established at their home in Pisa, these sonnets were first made known, in MS., to Mr. Browning, on this wise, according to Mr. Edmund Gosse, who heard it from Browning himself:

"Their custom was, Mr. Browning said, to write alone, and not to show each other what they had written. This was a rule which he sometimes broke through, but she never. He had the habit of working in a downstairs room, where their meals were spread, while Mrs. Browning studied in a room on the floor above. One day, early in 1847, their breakfast being over, Mrs. Browning went upstairs, while her husband stood at the window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of some one behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs. Browning, who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room. Mr. Browning seated himself at the table and unfolded the parcel. It contained the series of sonnets which have now become so illustrious. As he read, his emotion and delight may be conceived. Before he had finished it was impossible for him to restrain himself, . . . he rushed upstairs, and stormed that guarded citadel. He was early conscious that these were treasures not to be kept from the world. 'I dared not reserve to myself,' he said, 'the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's.' But Mrs. Browning was very loth indeed to consent to the publication of what

had been the very notes and chronicle of her betrothal. At length she was persuaded to permit her friend, Miss Mary Russell Mitford, to whom they had originally been sent in manuscript, to pass them through the press."—"Critical Kit-Kats," p. 2.

Accordingly a thin octavo volume of 47 pages was printed, entitled:

Sonnets | by | E. B. B. | Reading. | *Not for Publication* | 1847.

The Sonnets were first published in the edition of 1850, at the close of the second volume, and the title "Sonnets from the Portuguese" was suggested by Robert Browning, and agreed upon as preferable to his wife's suggestion of "Sonnets translated from the Bosnian," with the idea of veiling the authorship and yet acknowledging their connection with the author of "Catarina to Camoëns," whom Robert Browning, who much admired this lyric of hers, used to call his "own little Portuguese" before he knew of the Sonnets.

I. LINE 1. *How Theocritus had sung*: in his Idyl xv., at the beginning of the Adonis song occurring in it. The passage is translated by Mr. Andrew Lang thus: "O Aphrodite, that playest with gold, lo, from the stream eternal of Acheron they have brought back to thee Adonis—even in the twelfth month they have brought him, the dainty-footed Hours. Tardiest of the Immortals are the beloved Hours, but dear and desired they come, for always, to all mortals, they bring some gift with them." The poet was probably not unmindful of the appropriateness of the reference to the Adonis song for still another reason—that it celebrated the return of Spring and the re-animation of Love, and as readers of the Browning Love Letters will notice, their first meeting was in May, and the famous

letter from Robert, shortly after, which was destroyed for its plain speaking, evidently was sent May 23, 1845.

5. *In his antique tongue*: Theocritus (born B.C. 315) was born in Syracuse, Sicily, the greatest of the cities of Magna Græcia, and wrote, of course, in Greek.

11. *Drew me backward by the hair*: so Athene, in "Mystic Shape," unseen by those who were with him, drew Achilles "backward by the hair." (See "Iliad," i., 204.)

14. *Not Death, but Love*: the awakening from the invalid's anticipation of death to a growing consciousness of love and all it means is the key theme throughout the sonnets. Compare recurrences of this, vii., 2-6; xxiii., 9-10, 13-14; xxvii., 8, 14; xxxix., 10; xl., 12-14; xlii., 5, 6; also Robert Browning's "O Lyric Love" in the "The Ring and the Book," i., 1389, 1390; and "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," p. 211: "I had done *living*, I thought, when you came and sought me out."

II. 1. *But only three, etc.*: again, perhaps, a veiled allusion to the destroyed letter in which, according to our poet, Robert spoke "wildly," saying "intemperate things . . . fancies" which she begged him to forget at once and let die out between them alone, and so spare her the sadness of having to break through an intercourse promising friendliness and sympathy. (See "The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," pp. 74-75, also pp. 221-222, 205, 213.)

5. *To amerce my sight, etc.*: to deprive my sight, a similar use of "amerce" to that in Milton's "Paradise Lost," i., 609: "for his fault, amerced of heaven."

7. *The deathweights*: alluding to the old custom of placing pennies on the eyelids of the dead to keep them closed.

8. "*Nay*" is worse from God: "But that God is stronger

than we, cannot be a bitter thought to you but a holy thought," says "E. B. B." in a letter to "R. B.," Sept. 13, 1845, and again, three days later, "Something worse than even a sense of unworthiness, *God* has put between us." (See also "Letters of R. B. and E. B. B.," p. 224.)

III. 3. *Our ministering two angels*: compare xlii., 3, 16.

8. *To play thy part*: in the edition of 1850 this read "*ply thy part*."

12. *Leaning up*: a form of speech recurring in "watching up," iv., 4.—*A cypress tree*: the cypress being associated with death.

13. *The chrism is on thine head,—on mine, the dew*: referring in *the chrism* to the oil of anointing used in coronation, in *the dew*, to the death-damps.

IV. On this and the foregoing sonnet, also sonnets vii., viii., and ix., compare the "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," pp. 202, 210, 214, 223, and on; and also "Life and Love," "A Denial," "Proof and Disproof," "Question and Answer," and "Insufficiency" in this volume.

11. *My cricket chirps against thy mandolin*: "When you were only a poet to me (only a poet: does it sound irreverent? almost, I think!) I used to study characteristic by characteristic, and turn myself round in despair of being ever able to approach," Elizabeth wrote to Robert; and he, at another time, wrote to her of "the strange exalting way you will persist to think of me."

V. 2. *As once Electra her sepulchral urn*: when Electra receives her brother's funeral urn from the disguised Orestes, who afterward did wait beside her (see line 10 of the sonnet) also, and made known to her how in those ashes there was really

life, and only a pretence of death. (See the "Electra" of Sophocles, Plumptre's translation, lines 1126-1229.)

VI. 2. *Nevermore alone, etc.*: this "proof of this regard—all this that you are to me in fact . . . my wonder is greater than your wonder . . . I who sate here alone but yesterday, so weary of my own being." (See "Letters of R. B. and E. B. B.," i., p. 264.)

VII. 7. *The cup of dole*: compare the sonnet "Past and Future," Vol. II. of this edition.

VIII. 3. *Untold*: meaning untallied, or uncounted, not unexpressed.—*Gold and purple*: meaning riches and beauty—gold being the most precious metal, purple the color of royalty and state. Compare ix., 4; xvi., 4; xvii., 13.

4. *Laid them on the outside of the wall*: how true this is to the facts between the two poets, the "Love Letters" show, as see, for example, Vol. i., pp. 204-207.

5. *Largesse*: a public bounty distributed to a crowd. Here, a liberal gift offered as if left outside the door.

IX. 1. *Can it be right to give What I can give*: "What can I give you which it would not be ungenerous to give? What should I put into your life," she asks, in one of her letters, "but anxiety and sadness?"

7. *Peers*: used in the original sense of the word, as equals.

12. *Thy Venice glass*: poison poured in Venetian glass was popularly supposed to shatter it, the quality of such glass being so fine as to feel at once the subtle element of death in the liquid.

X. 8. *With conscience, etc.*: "conscience" is here used in the sense of *consciousness*, the original meaning, now rarely used.



XI. 5. *That once was girt To Climb Aornus*: evidently the "Aornus" meant is not the entrance to Hades fabled to be known by its birdlessness, because of the noxious gases rising, so that birds avoided flying near,—*aornus* meaning birdless,—but the Aornus of India is meant, a lonely, lofty rock whither only the birds of strong pinion soared to.

XII. 3. *Enow*: enough, an obsolete form of the word; compare Omar Khayyám in the Fitzgerald version:

"A book of verses underneath the bough,  
A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and Thou  
Singing beside me in the wilderness—  
Oh! wilderness were paradise enow.

XIV. 1. *Let it be for nought Except for love's sake only*: "The first moment in which I seemed to admit to myself . . . the possibility of your affection . . . was *that* when you intimated . . . that you cared for me, not for a reason, but because you cared for me. Now such a 'parceque' which reasonable people would take to be irrational was just the only one fitted to the uses of my understanding . . . for if so, it was altogether unanswerable," etc. (See "Love Letters," Vol. i., p. 275.)

11. *A creature might forget to weep*: in the edition of 1850 this line ran: "Since one might well forget to weep."

XV. 5. *A bee shut in a crystalline*: Dr. W. J. Rolfe, commenting on this line, considers that in using "crystalline" here, as a noun, the poet does not mean a bee shut in a crystal, as a fly in amber, but with a glass vessel over it. But the metaphor is not followed far beyond the mere significance of herself being shut away from the world, and from active life in her invalid room, while the beloved one is free of the sunshine, so that

there is no need of restricting the meaning to a glass tumbler over a captured bee; in fact, that is less appropriate, since she has no idea of her imprisonment being temporary as that would be, and elsewhere she uses "crystalline" as a noun, in the sense of a crystal.

6. *Since sorrow, etc.*: in edition of 1850 this read "for sorrow."

XVI. 9-10. *And as a vanquished soldier, etc.*: these lines in the edition of 1850 ran,

"And as a soldier struck down by a sword  
May cry, 'My strife ends here,' and sinks to earth,  
Even so," etc.

12. *Strife*: in the first edition was "doubt"! That the new readings are in all ways better than the original is obvious.

XVII. 10. *How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?* "Are you not my dear friend already and shall I not use you?" asked Robert Browning in one of his earliest letters before the two had met. ("Letters," p. 34.)

13. *Of palm or pine*: the former associated with life in this relation, the latter with death.

XVIII. 1. *I never gave a lock of hair...except this to thee*: Robert Browning asked for so much of her as might be given in a lock of hair. To this letter of Nov. 24, 1845, she replied the same day that she had never given away what he asked except to nearest relatives, and playfully putting him off while yielding, she wrote again on the 27th: "*I never can nor will give you this thing;—only... I will, if you please, exchange it for another thing—you understand... I will not pretend to be generous, no, nor 'kind.'* It shall be pure merchandise." There-

upon "R. B." the next day answers: "Take it, dearest; what I am forced to think you mean" (see "Letters of R. B. and E. B." Vol. i., pp. 296, 300, 303, 305, 308-9), and out of all this, sonnets xviii. and xix. grew.

7. *Nor plant I it from rose or myrtle-tree*: nor does she plant in her hair now sprigs from the rose or the myrtle tree.

10. *The head that hangs aside Through sorrow's trick*: lines that paint herself in accord with her portraits.

11. *I thought the funeral shears Would take this first*: an allusion to the Greek and Roman custom of cutting the hair at death.

14. *The kiss my mother left here when she died*: Oct. 1, 1828, Mrs. Barrett died.

XIX. 1. *The soul's Rialto, etc.*: the Rialto which animates this imagery is doubtless Shakespeare's, and it is the argosies of Antonio which are brought to mind as outweighed by this lock of hair (see "The Merchant of Venice," i. 1, 9, 3, 108). The merchandising of which she speaks is echoed in the love letters making the proposition to barter locks of hair, see foregoing quotation.

5. *As purply black, as erst to Pindar's eyes, etc.*: refers to Pindar's first Pythian ode beginning, "O golden lyre, thou common treasure of Apollo and the Muses violet-tressed," as Myer translates it. This word in the Greek, however, is *ιοπλοκάμων*, and as black is the nearest translation of our *ιο*, our poet's *purply-black* is a happy gloss upon the original.

XX. 12. *Some prescience of thee with the blossoms white Thou sawest*: a reference to the spring-time when they first met, after many letters had passed between them, more than one of Robert Browning's looking forward to the spring, when Miss Barrett hoped to be enough better to see him, and therefore

taking account of winds and signs of spring. "Surely the wind that sets my chestnut-tree dancing, all its baby-cone-blossoms, green now, rocking like fairy castles on a hill in an earthquake,—that is southwest surely!" he writes in a letter of May 3, 1845, which may have been in our poet's mind here.

XXI. 3. *A cuckoo-song*: a common phrase for an unwearying repetition like the cry of that bird.

4. *Never . . . without her cuckoo-strain Comes the fresh Spring*: that the cuckoo's note is the herald of spring in England many an English poet witnesses, notably the nameless writer of the charming old English song, "Sommer is y comin' in, Sing Cuckool"

XXII. 3. *The lengthening wings break into fire*: an image suggested by the glory of God present in the mercy-seat of the Ark in the Jewish tabernacle, the mercy-seat being between the wings of the golden angels sculptured above the Ark. (See Exodus xxv., 17-20.)

14. *The death-hour rounding it*: a use of the verb "to round" in the sense of enclosing and completing, like Shakespeare's "Our little life is rounded with a sleep." (See "The Tempest," iv., 1, 158.)

XXIV. 8. *Rife*: meaning ready, an obsolete use of the word, signifying "abundant" in Anglo-Saxon.

XXVI. 1. *I lived with visions for my company, etc.*: "I grew up in the country—had no social opportunities, had my heart in books and poetry, and my experience in reveries. . . . Books and dreams were what I lived in. . . . Afterwards, when my illness came . . . then I turned with some bitterness . . . [on my past, realizing] that I had seen no Human Nature."

XXVII. 10. *Dewless asphodel*: in the fields of Elysium where the flower of immortality, the asphodel, grows. "The meadows thick with asphodel," says Homer. (See "Odyssey," Book xi., 669.)

XXVIII. 1. *My letters*: which are now the world's and no less hers. (See the "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett," Vols. i. and ii., 1899.)

5. *This said, etc.*: the first letter, Jan. 10, 1845.

6. *This fixed a day in spring*: "I will call at two on Tuesday," "R. B." wrote in a letter of May 17, 1845.

8. *Yet I wept for it*: "When I wrote that letter to let you come the first time, do you know, the tears ran down my cheeks. —I could not tell why: partly it might be mere nervousness. And then I was vexed with you for wishing to come as other people did, and vexed with myself for not being able to refuse you as I did them" (i., p. 265).—*This . . . said*, Dear, I love thee: if one may trace the rich windings of this labyrinth of love, reverently, it is the letter of August 30 that is thus referred to.

11. *This said*, I am thine: in such letters, our poets were rich, yet the first is perhaps meant, the letter of September 13.

XXX. 2. *How Refer the cause*: "refer" here is used in the sense of tracing back an effect to its cause—how account for its origin.

XXXI. 4. *Unaverred*: meaning unconfessed, left unasserted or affirmed, the word "aver" being derived from the Latin *ad*, to, and *verum*, truth.

XXXII. 3. *Bonds which seemed to . . . quickly tied to make a lasting troth*: compare sonnet xxxvi.

12. *Perfect strains . . . from instruments defaced*: compare

the thought of Robert Browning's "My Star": "What matter to me if their Star is a world," etc. (See *Camberwell Browning*, Vol. iv., p. 230.)

XXXIII. 1. *Yes, call me by my pet-name*: see "The Pet Name" in Vol. II. of this edition. "But I *have* a new thing to say or sing—you never before heard me love and bless and send my heart after—'Ba'—did you? Ba—and that is you! I TRIED—(more than *wanted*) to call you that on Wednesday." So wrote Robert, and Elizabeth replied, "I am *glad* you do not despise my own right name too much, because I never was called Elizabeth by any one who loved me at all, and I accept the omen." Again in 1847 she wrote of Robert's always calling her *Ba* and thinking it the prettiest name in the world, which might be considered a proof not only of blind love but of deaf love.

6. *Voices which . . . Call me no longer*: her mother's, and her favorite brother's, Edward, who was drowned July, 1841, in Babbicombe Bay.

10. *Exanimate*: no longer animate, lifeless, used in the original sense, as in "Spenser's Faerie Queene," ii., 12, 7, "carkass exanimate."

XXXVII. 10. *Thy worthiest love to*: in the edition of 1850 reads "Thy worthiest love with."

11. *A shipwrecked Pagan, safe in port, etc.*: refers to the custom of giving to the god through whom came deliverance a statue in the temple, as a votive offering. Such a piece must be but a travesty of the power and majesty of the god himself.

XL. 5. *Giaours*: infidels, Saracens or Turks, Orientals, that is, whose love is that of the mere possession of beauty, who are allured by gayety, cruel despite tears.

7. *Polypheme's white tooth*: Polyphemus, the Cyclops,

one-eyed giant son of Neptune, who was in love with Galatea, the sea-nymph, in a crude and petulant way; but she, scoffing at his one eye and shaggy eyebrow, escaped him, hence the image of the white tooth of his appetite slipping on the coveted kernel.

XLI. 14. *Love that endures, from Life that disappears:* the "from" was "with" in edition of 1850.

XLII. 1. *My future will not copy fair my past:* quoted from the sonnet entitled "Past and Future." Concerning it Robert Browning wrote her, November, 1845, that it affected him more than any poem he ever read. "May God bless me, as you pray, by letting that beloved hand shake the less—I will only ask, *the less*—for being laid on mine through this life," and she answered with this sonnet, and in the Letters also, calling him her "angel," thus: "nor say, that I 'do not lean' on you with all the weight of my 'past'—because I do!" This sonnet did not appear in the edition of 1850, but was inserted between xli. and the following sonnet, in the reissue of the "Works" in 3 vols., 1856.

XLIV. This and the preceding sonnets were numbered respectively xliii. and xlii. in the edition of 1850. The flowers of which this closing sonnet speaks are referred to continuously throughout the "Love Letters." She writes in one case that her brothers say, "Ah, you had Mr. Browning with you yesterday, I see by the flowers, just as if they said, I see Queen Mab has been with you."

9. *Be overgrown:* the "Be" is here used in the sense of *are* and in the Elizabethan manner, as in "Hamlet," iii., 2, 32, "O there be players that I have seen," etc.



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Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart! . . . . .	3
What can I give thee back, O liberal . . . . .	8
When our two souls stand up erect and strong, . . . . .	22
When we met first and loved, I did not build . . . . .	36
With the same heart, I said, I'll answer thee . . . . .	34
Yes, call me by my pet-name! let me hear . . . . .	33
Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed . . . . .	10











